ALL IN THE FAMILY
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Psalm 119:105–112
Genesis 25:19–34
Genesis 33:1–11

"If you remember that your brother or sister has something against you,
leave your gift before the altar and go;
first be reconciled to your brother or sister."
Matthew 5: 23-24 (NRSV)

God saw our brokenness and sought to extricate us from it—but only with our cooperation.
God will not cajole or bully us, but wants to woo us for our own sakes. . . .
The Bible is the story of God's attempt to effect atonement, to bring us back to our
intended condition of relatedness. God was in Christ, reconciling the world to God.
God sent Jesus, who would fling out his arms on the cross as if to embrace us.
God wants to draw us back into an intimate relationship and so bring to unity
all that has become disunited. This was God's intention from the beginning.
And each of us is called to be an ally of God in this work of reconciliation.

Desmond Tutu

Students of literature know that there are only a few really good stories, and in one form or another they appear in every age, written in the idiom of the time. I heard an NPR book review segment last week about two new novels receiving a lot of critical attention, both of them based on Shakespeare's classic drama *Hamlet*. The reviewer was talking about them and the fact that writers continue to return to the great Shakespearean themes. *A Thousand Acres*, Jane Smiley's fine novel a few years ago, was a retelling of *King Lear*. Why, the interviewer asked, do writers continue to retell these centuries-old stories? The reviewer said it's because the old stories are really good stories, and, in fact, Shakespeare was, himself, retelling them for the people of his day. The oldest and best story in human

history, he said, is a simple narrative of betrayal and revenge—or forgiveness—and it gets even better when it happens in a family.

I thought about the version of that very story that appears in the first book of the Bible, Genesis chapters 25 through 33, about ten pages of compelling intrigue, betrayal, the threat of violent revenge, and finally reconciliation. And it's all in one small family.

The last time Jacob saw his brother, Esau, Jacob was looking nervously over his shoulder as he was leaving town, in a hurry. And the last thing he heard his brother say was, "On the day our father dies, I'm coming to kill you."

It was trouble from the start. They fought each other in their mother Rebekah's womb. It was such a difficult pregnancy that she wanted to die. When her sons arrived, firstborn Esau was ruddy and covered with a "hairy mantle," which was probably more like peach fuzz. The secondborn son, Jacob, was smooth.

The boys were different from the start. Esau was an outdoorsman, a skilled hunter who spent all day in the fields. He was his father Isaac's favorite. Jacob was quiet, an introvert, who stayed inside all day, reading, helping in the kitchen. He was his mother's favorite. And maybe at the outset there is something here about the risk and potential for tragedy in parental favoritism and sibling rivalry.

The first turn the story takes is the lentil stew incident, on the day Esau returns, famished, from a long day in the fields. Jacob is in the kitchen, cooking a stew. Now I admit I've always been fascinated by that stew. My father loved to make vegetable soup and would spend an entire day off from the railroad, in the kitchen, chopping onions, vegetables, and stew meat, slowly cooking and stirring and filling the house with the most amazing aroma—so that just a hint of it has the power to transport me to childhood and set my mouth to watering.

The older translations used to call it "pottage," and when I heard the minister say it, I thought he was mispronouncing "porridge," which I imagined as cream of wheat, and so I couldn't understand what was so interesting and enticing about that. Only later did I pursue this obscure detail linguistically and discover that it was literally a red lentil stew. The New Revised Standard Version translates it first "red stuff." Esau says, "Give me some of that red stuff."

Jacob is such an opportunist. "OK," he says, "but first I want your birthright"—the privilege and status of the firstborn. Esau is so hungry he agrees. "What's a birthright worth if I die of hunger?" And he digs into the red stuff.

The years pass. The boys are men now. Their father, Isaac, is old, blind, weak. It's time for the blessing of the firstborn, time for a father to confer on his eldest son the property, the responsibility for the family, the status and rights of clan leader. Isaac, old and blind, plans for a kind of intimate celebration with his beloved son, Esau: sends Esau out to hunt, to prepare his favorite meal, to bring it to him, and as they enjoy the meal together the blessing will be conveyed. Esau departs. Rebekah, watching and waiting, goes into action and sets in motion one of the great betrayals—scams—of all time. "Hurry," she tells Jacob. "Go slaughter two kids. I'll make his favorite meal for him. You take it to him. He'll think you are Esau and give the blessing to you." "We can't fool him like that," Jacob says. "He'll know I'm not Esau." "Leave it to me," Rebekah says. "Here. Put on Esau's clothes. They smell like the fields he spends all day walking. And bring the skins of the goats, and I'll put it on your hands and neck. He'll never suspect a thing. He's old and blind, remember."

So that is what they do, brilliantly. They pull it off. Isaac never has a chance. Jacob, with the hairy goat skin on his neck and hands, brings the meal to Isaac. Isaac suspects something is not right. "Your voice is Jacob's, but your hands are Esau's. Who are you?" he asks. "I'm Esau, your firstborn." "Come close, let me smell you. Ah, the smell of my son," Isaac says, "like the smell of a field the Lord has blessed."

They eat. The blessing is confirmed, the betrayal complete.

And then Esau appears to receive the blessing, bringing the meal he has prepared. "Who are you?" Isaac asks. "Your firstborn son, Esau." It is a moment of terrible realization, an awful truth. Isaac trembles, in grief and betrayal. It is a poignant, tragic moment: "What have I done? Who has done this to me? My wife and her favorite, Jacob." He's heartbroken, betrayed by his son and wife. Esau begs, "Bless me, too, Father." "I cannot, my son. It is done." And they weep together the tears of profound disappointment and grief that has not yet become anger.

Walter Brueggemann says the story connects with every parent whose dreams for a child are shattered.

Now Esau is enraged. "The day our father dies, I'm going to kill you," Esau says. Again Rebekah intercedes, sends Jacob off to live in the safety of her brother Laban's household.

Twenty more years pass. Jacob marries Laban's daughters Rachel and Leah, works for his uncle taking care of flocks. He's consistent, at least, still a swindler: he begins systematically to steal from Laban until his own flocks and wealth are conspicuous and his uncle/father-in-law begins to suspect

that there's something funny going on. So Jacob, with his entire family, packs up all their belongings and flocks and leaves during the night. Rachel thoughtfully runs back at the last moment and steals some of her parents' valuables.

All is well, but for one frightening reality: Esau is out there somewhere. Jacob hasn't seen or heard from him for twenty years. But it's safe to assume that Esau hasn't forgotten what happened and that his vow to reap revenge by killing his brother is still a magnificent obsession for him. A moment of high and unavoidable truth is approaching.

Jacob sends his entire entourage across a stream called the Jabbok and remains behind to spend the night, maybe his last night, alone. He wrestles that night with a stranger, emerges with a limp and a new name, and as the sun rises on a new day, he sees on the horizon the sight he has been dreading for twenty years: Esau. And not just Esau—Esau with 400 armed men.

It's so like Jacob to send the women and children out front, which he starts to do, but at the very last moment, in what is the only act of integrity and courage in his entire sordid story, he walks out in front himself, alone, vulnerable. He bows before his brother seven times. If a death blow is coming, let it be now. He bows and bows. Behind him his wives and children and servants bow. Four hundred armed men could easily slay them all.

When he recognizes Jacob, whom he has not seen for twenty years, Esau runs, throws his arms around Jacob, embraces him, and they both weep.

And then in what might be the most important theological line in the narrative, Jacob says to his estranged brother, whom he has betrayed: "To see your face is like seeing the face of God."

Jacob assumed, understandably, that for twenty long years Esau had nursed his resentment and anger, that the years had deepened and hardened that anger. But apparently something else had been going on in Esau's heart: a softening, a gentle melting, and a desire for reconciliation with the brother who had treated him so shamefully. So Esau did the most unlikely, outrageous, unexpected thing. He did not kill Jacob, as he promised to do. He did not execute the justice everyone expected. He embraced and forgave his brother.

In the whole history of humankind, with dreary consistency, violence is met with violence; wrongdoing is met with punishment; revenge is the rule so much that we call it justice. An eye for an eye; a life for a life. And here in this old story, coming from the very edges of recorded history, is the most revolutionary idea of all: God does not want revenge. God wants

forgiveness, reconciliation. At the heart of the Judeo-Christian tradition is the profoundly radical idea that God, the sovereign Lord of history, is in the reconciliation business; that God has, from the beginning, been redefining the right, the good, the just, as forgiveness, not retaliation.

We have, in our own experience, witnessed the futility of answering violence with violence. Palestinian extremists lob rockets into Israel. Israel kills Palestinian civilians. Hamas vows revenge and another rocket is fired. Israel responds. It is so predictable and so hopeless.

And we have witnessed the alternative in our time. Desmond Tutu, Anglican Archbishop of Capetown, was a stalwart opponent of apartheid in his native South Africa, spoke out against the regime when it was dangerous to do so, in a thousand ways defied the law that he regarded as morally wrong. And as a lonely voice in South Africa, rejected violence as the means to respond to the terrible, oppressive injustices of apartheid. When the system finally collapsed and South African blacks were given their freedom and political prisoners such as Nelson Mandela, who had spent twenty-seven years in prison as a terrorist, were released, no one thought there would be a way to avoid a terrible bloodbath. All those years of oppression, beatings and torture and killing—a well-armed insurrection would surely now turn on the oppressors and exact an understandable revenge.

Nelson Mandela, newly released from prison and now the President of South Africa, had a different idea, forged from his own years in prison. He had learned, he said, that if he hated his captors, if he allowed his understandable rage to consume him, he would remain their prisoner forever. So, wanting to be truly free, he chose to forgive them.

Mandela persuaded his old friend Desmond Tutu to delay his retirement and chair the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that Mandela planned to establish. Victims would be invited to tell their stories at public hearings. Perpetrators of violence would be invited to testify and tell their stories in exchange for clemency. No one thought it would work. And it wasn't perfect. But South Africa managed to avoid the bloody cataclysm everyone thought was coming. Strong men told the truth and wept, and healing slowly began to happen.

It is so very difficult to forgive. It seems sometimes that we actually enjoy our resentment and anger over wrongs committed against us. "Of the Seven Deadly Sins," Frederick Buechner quipped, "anger is the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll your tongue over the prospect of bitter confrontations yet to come, to savor the last toothsome morsel of the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back — in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that

what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you" (*Wishful Thinking*, p. 2).

It is so very difficult to forgive. In his introduction to the report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Archbishop Tutu wrote, "We have been privileged to help heal a wounded people, though we ourselves have been, in Henri Nouwen's profound and felicitous phrase, 'wounded healers.' When we look around us at some of the conflict areas of the world, it becomes increasingly clear that there is not much of a future without forgiveness."

The truth Archbishop Tutu understood is a truth embedded in the Christian tradition all the way back to its roots in Judaism, namely that only the wounded can heal, only the offended one can forgive. The person who betrayed can apologize over and over, but reconciliation doesn't happen until the one betrayed makes a decision deep in his or her heart to forgive.

Jesus Christ calls you and me to live like that. "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors," he taught us to pray. "Forgive us our sins, our betrayals, as we forgive those who have sinned against and betrayed us."

He calls us in our families, our marriages, our intimate relationships—where this becomes most difficult—with our friends and colleagues, in our politics, to forgive as a way of living and being, to extend grace and reconciliation as an expression of our trust in him.

He told his disciples that being reconciled to a brother or sister was more important even than public worship.

His own best story was about a terribly wronged father who runs down the road to welcome home a wayward, sinful son, to forgive and embrace him before he can say his apology.

And the genius of Jesus' own Jewish faith and our Christian faith based on him is the amazing notion that God does not harbor anger and resentment; that God does not remember iniquities and betrayals, small, large; that God is a forgiving, reconciling God who wants all of us, you and me, to know the peace and security of God's steadfast love and to express that same holy love and forgiveness in all we do.

Amen.